

Work and Pensions Committee Call for Evidence Youth employment, education and training

Summary of response:

Young people face significant barriers to accessing education, employment and training, including mental health needs, insufficient local provision and the impact of funding cuts. These challenges disproportionately affect young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Youth workers help to bridge these gaps by providing trusted, voluntary relationships that build confidence, connect young people to local opportunities and equip them with essential life skills.

About the NYA

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the professional, statutory and regulatory body for youth work in England, whose primary mission is to enable high quality youth work across a range of settings, building the capacity and sustainability of the youth work sector.

Section 1: Young people who are NEET

What factors lead to a young person not being in education, employment or training (NEET)? Are there some young people who are more likely to be NEET than others?

There are many factors which can prevent young people from participating in employment, education or training. These include inconsistent local support, mental health needs, limited access to specialist provision and wider structural inequalities. Youth workers see these challenges firsthand and are often the professionals young people turn to when other services are not available or accessible. However, youth work's role in supporting young people who are NEET is frequently undervalued and overlooked.

Young people's mental health

Research published by The King's Trust and the Learning and Work Institute shows that England's escalating mental health crisis is a major factor preventing young people from accessing employment, education or training.¹ When young people who are NEET were asked why they were struggling to find, or are not actively looking for

¹ [Power of Potential: Supporting the future of NEET young people](#) 'The Power of Potential: Supporting the future of NEET young people', The King's Trust and the Learning and Work Institute, 2022.

employment opportunities, the most common reason given was having a mental health problem or disability, as cited by 39% of respondents. This evidence suggests that young people's poor mental health is having a significant impact on their ability to access academic or professional development pathways.

Findings from the NYA's National Youth Sector Census 2025 reinforce this picture, with **84% of youth sector organisations reporting an increased demand for mental health support services.**

Vulnerable groups of young people, including those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, care leavers or those with a learning disability are more likely to have poor mental health and require additional support. According to research published by Barnardo's, looked after children are over four times more likely to have a mental health disorder than the general population.²

Shauna's story

Shauna's story is an example of the impacts of Covid-19 on a young person's educational experience. Shauna completed her GCSE examinations during the Covid-19 pandemic and found that, on starting college, she found the classroom environment overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.

After discovering an opportunity with a local charity, Building Self-Belief, Shauna began working with young people. Youth work provided an alternative pathway to help Shauna discover her passion and purpose. She has since achieved a Level 6 apprenticeship in Youth Work and was recognised as 'Youth Worker of the Year' at the NE Youth Impact Awards 2024.

The mental health crisis has been significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with many young people experiencing isolation, a lack of motivation and increased financial pressures. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) from 2024, NEET rates have grown exponentially since the pandemic.

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often face additional barriers to accessing education, employment and training, and are at an increased risk of being excluded from school. These barriers can include unmet support needs, inaccessible learning environments or limited specialist provision, with particular gaps in support identified during the transitional period from education

² [neglected-minds.pdf](#) 'Neglected Minds', Barnardo's 2017.

to adulthood. The National Education Union identifies the need for a “more inclusive system which takes a more holistic, whole child approach towards behaviour support.”³ Youth workers can help bridge this gap since youth work takes a relational, person-centred approach that is focused on achieving positive outcomes for the young person in question.

There are significant, long-term benefits for young people facing multiple, complex challenges and who are often particularly vulnerable, of having the support of skilled youth workers. Some of these benefits are outlined in the [NYA's guidance around the benefits of Transitional Safeguarding](#) for under-supported groups of young people aged between 15 and 24. This guidance explains that the nature of the trusted relationships forged between youth workers and the young people they support are not designed to change or stop when the young person reaches 18 or leaves formal care or education. This consistency of support is particularly important for young people with a learning disability, care leavers or other vulnerable groups who often report experiencing a “cliff edge” in support on turning 18, as service provision drops off rapidly and their needs are no longer met.

Cost-of-living impact on young people

Many young people cite rising costs as a barrier to participating in employment and education. According to the King's Trust's Youth Index report, **one out of ten young people who are NEET have turned down a job because they could not afford the costs associated with it, such as transport, rent or uniform.**⁴ This finding is particularly concerning for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who, as a result of these increased financial pressures and in the absence of standardised financial education and support, are at an increased risk of becoming excluded from the labour market and post-16 education and training pathways. Fragmented access to education, employment and training opportunities for young people underscores the importance of the Government's Opportunity Mission to create fair access to opportunity, regardless of background or postcode.

Access to transport

The cost of travel and unreliability of transport in certain areas of the country can further limit a young person's access to opportunities and act as a barrier to participation in education, employment or training. Learning from the Local Youth Transformation Programme (LYTP) pilot areas revealed that transport links vary depending on a young person's postcode, with young people in rural areas experiencing more barriers to accessing education, employment and training opportunities as a result. Additional findings from the LYTP pilot areas included reports that some young people in urban areas may limit where they travel to and

³ [SEND children and exclusion | National Education Union](#) SEND children and exclusion, National Education Union, 2023.

⁴ [King's Trust TK Maxx Youth Index 2025](#), Youth Index Report, King's Trust and TK Maxx, 2025.

through if there are certain areas they feel unable to access safely, for example areas that may be where a gang operates and is therefore inaccessible or unsafe to them.

These findings reinforce patterns arising from other research, which reflect the structural inequalities of local support and provision on offer, with young people from low-income households at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers.

In summary, **young people experience a myriad of barriers to education, employment and training, and access to these opportunities varies depending on the local youth offer, a lack of affordable or available transport links, and wider factors like mental and physical health.** At the same time, there is an increasing need for support that enables young people to overcome these barriers and access education, employment, and training. However, services dedicated to helping young people with these challenges often cannot keep up with the demand.

Youth work plays a vital role in filling this gap, providing a safe, trusted space for young people to overcome challenges, discover and develop their potential and explore what success looks like for their future.

Section 2: Preventing young people from becoming NEET

How can the Government, and the DWP, help to prevent young people becoming NEET in the first place?

Invest in transformative youth work

There is a plethora of research that highlights the transformative power of youth work, particularly in supporting young people to access employment, education and training opportunities. One such example can be drawn from the journey of Lorraine Lambert, GB Paralympian and Youth Worker, who leads employment programmes for young people at The King's Trust.

Lorraine led the launch of the NYA's Youth Work Week 2025 campaign and her full story can be found here: ['I'm prouder of my youth work than any gold medal' - Paralympian Lorraine Lambert launches Youth Work Week 2025 - National Youth Agency.](#)

Lorraine celebrates the breadth of support youth workers give young people, whether it's helping them to write their CV, providing them with relevant contacts, or supporting them to boost their confidence and self-esteem.

“Never underestimate that impact of having someone there to support a young person.” – Lorraine Lambert, Youth Worker/ Paralympian, King's Trust

A key tenet of the youth work profession is the voluntary, trusted relationship a youth worker builds with a young person. Lorraine believes that youth workers are “providing a brighter future just by being there”. The trusted relationship a youth worker fosters with a young person can provide emotional support, positive educational and employment outcomes and protect against the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences.⁵ According to research commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation with the Institute for Employment Studies on supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful employment, youth workers can act as “magnets” to attract and engage young people at risk in programmes of support relating to welfare and education provision.⁶

Moreover, the voluntary nature of the relationship between a young person and their youth worker is fundamental in creating safe, supportive spaces for young people to develop their confidence, skills and talents. Youth work is particularly impactful because youth workers approach relationship-building from an equitable, non-hierarchical standpoint, talking with young people as equals. This approach enables young people to feel respected and in control, strengthening the quality of the relationship and potential for young people to develop their skillset.

Through investing in youth work as a preventative service, the Government and DWP could help to prevent young people from becoming NEET. Evidence from UK Youth supports this conclusion, finding that youth work is an effective preventative measure, which reduces negative future outcomes for young people, including becoming NEET.⁷

Section 3: Support for young people who are NEET

What is the most effective way of delivering support to young people who are NEET? Are there any initiatives that can be learned from, domestically or internationally?

Building young people’s confidence through youth work

Youth work is an effective way of delivering trusted, tailored support to young people who are NEET. The support provided by youth workers includes confidence building, signposting to local opportunities and essential life skills, such as improved financial literacy. Findings from the National Youth Sector Census 2025 show that the two main areas of increasing demand reported by youth organisations are mental health and wellbeing support (reported in 84% of organisations) and access to a trusted adult or someone to talk to (reported in 59% of organisation).

⁵ [Trusted adult relationships | Reports and Impact | YoungMinds](#), ‘Outcomes of trusted adult relationships’, Young Minds, no date.

⁶ [v14-IES-evidence-review-FINAL.pdf](#), Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work, Youth Futures Foundation and the Institute for Employment Studies, 2020.

⁷ [Youth-work-and-prevention.pdf](#) Youth Work and Prevention, UK Youth, 2024.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, youth workers provided support to young people facing mental health and wellbeing challenges. Their efforts enabled individuals to overcome isolation and foster increased confidence and self-esteem. Casey dropped out of college due to mental health pressures and found himself isolated in his room during the period of national lockdown. Casey's social isolation was exacerbated by the sudden death of his father just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Casey cites the importance of the *Explore* programme that he took part in through the King's Trust, which helped him to overcome his social and physical isolation.

“There’s a lot of people out there who, like me, struggle with social situations, struggle with making friends, struggle with confidence and motivation. I think without youth workers, those people may get stuck in those ways.” - Casey, 24, King’s Trust

Casey now enjoys his job working at M&S, spends time with friends and is happy with his life. Casey credits his youth worker, Lorraine Lambert, for providing him with the tools to reach this place of professional and personal contentment.

These examples underscore the importance of trusted, person-centred relationships in supporting young people who are NEET.

Building on this, there is significant potential for DWP to strengthen the support provided through Jobcentre Plus by drawing on youth work-informed practice. **Youth work-informed training would strengthen Work Coaches’ relational skills, helping them build trust with young people who are NEET, many of whom face complex barriers to engagement. By improving Work Coaches’ understanding of these challenges, DWP could ensure its employment support is more responsive, accessible and effective for those furthest from the labour market.**

Financial literacy

Key to overcoming financial barriers to young people participating in education, employment and training is a focus on improving the financial literacy of young people, ensuring they have appropriate knowledge of how to manage their money effectively and understand more broadly the financial decisions made around them. The NatWest Thrive programme, in partnership with the NYA, aims to instil young people with essential skills to approach money management, develop their confidence and realise their potential.

The cost of living, exacerbated by recent global events like the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to an increased financial pressure on many young people across the country. A young person who took part in the [NatWest Thrive programme](#), Jordan, explained that he found managing his personal finances stressful and tended to avoid checking his bank balance. Through taking part in the interactive Thrive sessions with youth workers he had developed trusted relationships with, Jordan learnt important budgeting tips, including how to set realistic savings goals and understand interest rates. By the end of the programme, Jordan reported feeling more confident about

his finances, had opened a savings account and was feeling empowered to making better financial decisions.

“Money Matters” Case Study

“Money Matters” is a programme of support provided by the Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA), which provides 1-1 and group support for young people to improve their financial education, access to online education and training and assist with CV writing and interview preparation.

The programme provides targeted support to young people aged 15-24 who are at increased risk of becoming NEET, including those who are care experienced.

Participants in the programme have shared how much the support has helped them when applying to jobs, and more broadly in navigating the challenges of daily life.

There is a direct correlation between increasing a young person’s financial literacy and their participation in employment, education and training, as illustrated by UK Finance’s Financial Education Report (2024), which found that inadequate financial education is linked to higher rates of unemployment.

Training tools and resources

As the professional, statutory, and regulatory body for youth work in England, the NYA delivers targeted programmes of support, including the National Youth Work Curriculum and a range of online learning and resources to enable youth workers to best support young people, particularly those who are, or at risk of becoming, NEET.

The [National Youth Work Curriculum](#) provides a framework outlining how youth work can be used to support the personal, social and political development of young people. One area of focus for the curriculum is the economic and financial wellbeing of young people. Trusted relationships with youth workers enable young people to access spaces where they can develop employability skills, explore education and employment pathways, and prepare for future placements through activities such as CV development. The [NYA’s Transitional Safeguarding principles](#) also reflect youth work’s key values and ethics, taking both a relational and person-centred approach to supporting young people.

The NYA has also developed a [toolkit for youth workers](#) in partnership with UK Youth, to support young people to get into employment. This toolkit provides information and insights into young people’s experiences, hopes for the future and

the barriers they face to realising their aspirations. Furthermore, the toolkit includes practical tips and guidance, as well as relevant tools and resources, for youth workers to better equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to successfully navigate the world of employment and training.

The NYA also [runs free, online courses](#) to educate youth workers on how best to support young people to overcome barriers to employment and education. It is essential that youth workers, and other professionals working closely with young people, are equipped with the knowledge and skills to best support young people who are NEET. This includes understanding the challenges faced by young people who are NEET and knowing where to signpost them for careers advice and further support.

What barriers are there to employers offering and targeting apprenticeships at young people? How effectively will the Government's current approach address these?

Cost is a principal barrier to employers offering and targeting apprenticeships at young people. [The NYA has partnered with NatWest to offer fully funded Level 3 and Level 6 apprenticeships](#), which equates to £4,500 worth of training for a Level 3 or £20,000 for a Level 6. This funding comes from the company's Levy Transfer Scheme and is an extremely successful programme, offering a range of benefits to the participant and employer, including creating a skilled, loyal, motivated workforce.

Experience from a local authority in the South West highlights the value of investing in apprenticeships as they are vital to providing flexible, tailored learning particularly for young people who find traditional academic pathways challenging.

“Apprenticeships I think, are vital because a lot of people learn better in a practical sense. By investing in youth workers, we're investing in young people. We're investing in their communities. We're giving them hope that things can be different, that things can change.” Tracy Hayes, Plymouth Marjon University.

Section 4: Employment and the labour market

What are the main barriers to employers supporting young people into employment and how can the Government better work with employers to address these?

A lack of understanding of what opportunities exist can also prove to be a barrier to participating in employment and training opportunities as young people are often unaware of their local employment offer.

Youth workers can signpost the young people they support to new opportunities and contacts, sharing ideas and information to help young people to discover future career and other development options.

Harley, a young person supported by Lorraine Lambert at the King's Trust, thought that their career aspirations were unrealistic, a viewpoint that was compounded by a lack of support from relatives and their additional needs relating to ADHD. Working with Lorraine made Harley see that anything is possible, providing Harley with the tools to make their aspirations a reality.

The NYA consistently hears from young people who have found their vocation through the opportunities provided by youth work. Through accessing a youth centre, young people can connect through sport, art, and other activities, learning what they enjoy and developing essential life skills. Lacie, a young person who attended Strood Youth Centre during a difficult time in her life, improved her confidence and self-esteem, now regularly volunteers at the youth centre and describes herself as the happiest version of herself.

“Before I felt lost and felt like I didn’t have anywhere to go, compared to now I feel like I have somewhere to go. I’m probably the happiest I’ve been for ages.” – Lacie, 16, Strood Youth Centre

To watch Lacie’s full story, please click [here](#).

What impact may developments in technologies, such as AI, have on the employment of young people? How should Government respond?

While AI offers opportunities, it also presents risks - particularly for entry-level roles - that traditionally act as stepping stones into employment. Young people looking to enter the world of employment are faced with a barrage of messaging relating to AI stealing their jobs. Exposure to this content, which is framed as increasingly urgent and more serious, has a hugely detrimental impact on young people’s career aspirations and their mental health. This messaging can also prove challenging for young people already in employment, as they may fear that they could be replaced by AI in the future, leading to anxiety about the stability of their role.⁸ Children missing education and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds will be most significantly impacted by the challenges posed by AI and new technologies as they may have less access to up-to-date career information, both online and in person.

An effective Government response must therefore focus on preparing young people for an AI enabled world of work while ensuring that new technologies do not exacerbate existing inequalities. Investment in, and support for the creation of a strong digital youth offer would support young people develop their knowledge and operation of AI through upskilling sessions run by youth workers. This would help

⁸ [AI anxiety: The workers who fear losing their jobs to artificial intelligence - BBC Worklife](#) AI Anxiety: The workers who fear losing their jobs to artificial intelligence, BBC, 2023.

prepare them for technological changes that are already underway and build confidence in using AI. With this in mind, the NYA published [Digital Youth Work Standards](#), to provide guidance for youth workers navigating the rapidly evolving world of digital youth work to ensure they can best support young people to stay safe online.

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